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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study of the leadership of nine presidents who have accepted the risks and challenges of executive leadership in nine small Midwestern colleges. Focus is directed toward these presidents' risk-taking strategies with respect to the major leadership challenges of being a senior executive of a small institution. The paper also addresses the variations in strategies discovered and conceptualized metaphorically within a framework of three degrees of institutional health: (1) institutions in critical condition; (2) institutions requiring symptomatic relief; and (3) healthy institutions seeking new levels of institutional performance. Interviews reveal that institutional vitality largely rests on the clarity of its mission, the articulation of that mission to all concerned, and its willingness and capacity for change. Success at risk taking seems to be a function of fit between presidential style and an institution's needs, within the context of institutional health, e.g., an enterprising spirit among presidents of dying institutions. Also, the more intuitive style of problem solving, although high in risk, apparently gives the kind of jolt an institution needs to get going. In some cases, the enthusiasm and sense of hope ingrained by these presidents is capable of instilling new life into an institutional framework that had all but expired. Contains a 90-item bibliography. (GLR)

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Shaping Institutional Vision:

The Risk of Presidential Leadership in Small Colleges

(a preliminary report)

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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Marriott City Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 29 - November 1, 1992. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Statement of the Problem

As American higher education enters an era of diminished resources, the role of presidential leadership, perhaps now more than ever, is critical in guiding institutions through troubled times. Prospects of decreasing federal and state funding, changing enrollment patterns, and increasing consumer demands for greater accountability, flexibility, and higher quality all contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty, where the need for institutional leaders as entrepreneurs (Guertin, 1987; Peck, 1985), intuitive scientists (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Birnbaum, 1986), and risk takers (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Seymour, 1987) is paramount. This is particularly the case with small private colleges, where the margin for error in defining a workable future is often fragile and precarious. Unlike larger institutions, most small colleges are tuition-dependent (Tuckman & Arcady, 1985) and are more limited in the number of course and curricular options they can offer; thus, on the one hand, they are more restricted in how they can respond to changing conditions. On the other hand, however, small colleges are also places "where real creativity and innovation occur, where ideas can be tested and possibly institutionalized" (West, 1982, p. 17). In either case, "small colleges are more dependent on presidential leadership than large ones are. . . [and] are thus more vulnerable than large institutions to ineffective leadership from the president's office" (West, 1983, p. 20). The effectiveness of presidents of small colleges and the risk-taking abilities they bring to these positions are perhaps more vital than those of their counterparts in large institutions, further underscoring the need, especially in small colleges, for leadership that is opportunity-conscious, innovative, and risk-taking (Peck, 1985).

The key to responding to the challenges facing higher education lies in the hands of risk-taking leaders who are committed to change and who are willing and able to make bold decisions to advance their institutions (Guertin, 1987; Peck, 1985). However, despite the recognition of risk taking as one of the characteristics of effective leadership (Bennis &

Nanus, 1985; Gardner,1990; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Seymour, 1987), surprisingly little research has been conducted on presidential leadership and risk taking in higher education, and virtually no research of this nature has been undertaken focusing on small college presidents, in specific, as risk-taking leaders in higher education. A growing literature has evolved in recent years on various leadership theories, styles, and contexts. Included in these lines of inquiry are studies on academic leadership (e.g., Birnbaum, 1992; Hesburgh, 1988), administrative leadership (e.g., Bensimon, Neumann & Birnbaum, 1989), charismatic (e.g., Conger, Kanungo, & Associates, 1988), educational (e.g., Brown & Walworth, 1985), entrepreneurial (e.g., Peck,1985), organizational (e.g., Schein, 1985), realistic (e.g., Daniels, 1983), servant (e.g., Greenleaf, 1977), situational (e.g., Hershey, 1984), transactional (e.g., Hoover, 1987), transformational (e.g., Cameron & Ulrich, 1986), and visionary leadership (e.g., Nanus, 1992). In addition are studies focusing on presidential leadership roles (e.g., Benezet, Katz, & Magnusson, 1981; Cohen & March, 1986), presidential tasks and responsibilities (e.g., Berendzen, 1986; Kauffman, 1980), the social, cultural, and organizational contexts in which college presidents work (e.g., Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Kerr & Gade, 1986), and presidential effectiveness (e.g., Fisher, Tack & Wheeler, 1988). However, few researchers have focused on how presidents take on their roles, assume their responsibilities, and learn about their work places (Dill, 1984); even less is known about the difficulties they face and the mistakes they make in doing so (Neumann, 1988). What are the risks and challenges faced by the chief executives of small private institutions? What are the characteristics of those who serve at the helm of these institutions? What strategies do they use to manage the risks inherent to such a position and how do they implement these strategies? Questions such as these formed the context for this study and served as an emergent framework for understanding the nature of risk-taking leadership in a select group of small private colleges.

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study of the leadership of nine presidents who have accepted the risks and challenges of executive leadership in nine small Midwestern colleges. Our particular focus is directed toward these presidents' risk-taking strategies with respect to the major leadership challenges of being a senior executive of a small institution. This paper also addresses variations in strategies discovered and conceptualized metaphorically within a framework of three degrees of institutional health: (a) institutions in critical condition; (b) institutions requiring symptomatic relief; and (c) healthy institutions seeking new levels of institutional performance. We offer insights to those engaged in leadership inquiry, those who teach courses in higher education leadership, and those who bring an interest in the risk-taking strategies of small college presidents. Furthermore, we present these insights in the words of the presidents themselves, a reflection of a new and important trend toward documenting "subjective reality" in leadership studies (e.g., Neumann & Bensimon, 1990).

Methodology

Participants

A list of 71 presidents of small private colleges and universities located in a tri-state, Midwestern region was generated from information contained in the 1991 HEP Higher Education Directory. A pre-participation questionnaire, elaborating on the focus of the study and soliciting information about risk-taking experiences, was mailed to each president for the purposes of identifying a variety of the most informative participants. Of those 71 presidents sent an initial inquiry, 17 responded positively to an invitation to participate in the study. Following the suggestion of Goetz and LeCompte (1984), that participants should be selected based on a set of predetermined criteria or list of attributes they possess, the nine final participants for this study were selected to reflect maximum variation in their length of time in the current presidency, the variety of risk-taking examples they acknowledged on the pre-participation questionnaire, and their characteristics with respect to age, gender, education, and other relevant background data.

These nine institutions ranged in size from 110 to almost 3,000 students. Two of the colleges were identified as independent, coeducational campuses; two institutions were single-sex, church-related campuses (one women's and one men's college); and five colleges were church-related, coeducational campuses, three of which were former women's colleges. Four campuses were located in rural areas, one in a large urban area, and four in various suburban settings.

Of the nine participating presidents, seven were males, two of these being ordained clergy, and two were females, both being members of religious orders. The tenure of their current presidencies ranged from one to eleven years at the time of the on-campus interviews. All but one completed Ph.D. degrees in areas including education, behavioral science, and biblical studies; one participant had completed master's degrees in business administration and economics. Six of the presidents had no previous presidential experience, while three had served prior to their present position in the presidency of other institutions. For four of these participants, becoming a college president was the realization of a long-standing career dream, whereas three responded to colleague's encouragement to assume leadership at a point of institutional transition; two indicated that "it [i.e. becoming president] just happened."

Data Collection and Analysis

Employing the standard tools of qualitative inquiry (interviews, document analysis, and observation), the researchers completed the initial phase of data collection for this study over a period of nine months during the 1991-92 academic year. The primary data were collected through two-day, on-site interviews with each of the nine presidents of the selected institutions. To focus the interview, to assure consistency of questions posed to each participant, and to maximize productive use of limited interview time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990), an interview guide was developed and grounded in the literature on risk-taking leadership. Fundamental questions addressed what each president perceived to be the essential risk of presidential leadership, what risk-taking approaches

each president found most effective, and the importance each president ascribed to his or her willingness to take risks as an institutional leader. In addition, relevant documents, including participant resumes, campus publications, annual reports, archive collections about special institutional events, board minutes, self-studies, and accreditation reports were reviewed in order to become familiar with each participant's work setting and to gain knowledge about the context of the organizational environment where each participant engaged in risk-taking decisions.

Based upon these preliminary data, individual case reports were developed for each institution, summarizing the major challenges facing each president at the time the office was assumed, and descriptive of subsequent risk-taking strategies employed in response to these challenges. These case reports were distributed to participants for purposes of conducting a member check of the emergent themes and ideas.

Results

Institutional Types

Based upon an analysis of data gained from the field interviews, a review of institutional documents, and observations of each college, we discovered three categories of institutional health, each reflective of circumstances apparent at the time each institution's current president assumed office. These are (a) "dying institutions," (b) "symptomatic institutions," and (c) "healthy institutions."

"Dying institutions" included Adams, Davis, Eastown and Gateview Colleges (all fictitious names for purposes of confidentiality and institutional anonymity). These colleges were most often characterized by an absence of vision, organizational chaos, financial crisis, concerns about academic quality, and lack of public understanding and support. While not all were experiencing the same degree of trauma, these colleges were all deteriorating in one way or another as institutions of higher learning. From the perspective of their current president, administrative predecessors had either failed to "establish a sense of direction," or had neglected to "create an institutional vision," or

simply had not "brought people together" to do some of the things that needed to be done in order to "keep the institution alive." The challenges for these campus leaders, as institutional "healers," were to resuscitate and stabilize institutional vital signs, in effect, administering immediate CPR to restore institutional vitality. If breathing is shallow, strengthen it; if a heart beat is faint, stimulate it; if blood pressure is dangerously low, increase it; stabilize and reduce vital fluctuations. In providing leadership "first aid", these presidents, like skilled triage professionals, felt the urgency to act quickly to "stop the bleeding," in the words of the Eastown College president, and to "rekindle a sense of hope," in the words of the president of Adams College. In these institutions the urgency and seriousness of the situation was obvious, as the president of Davis College recalled: "Every decision at that time was a matter of life and death."

Colleges among the "symptomatic institutions" included Carrolton, Hillside, and Ignatius. Unlike dying institutions, where chaos and crisis dominated institutional life, these colleges were basically free from major financial or academic challenges, although questions about institutional relevance left them considering new opportunities to revitalize, to change, or to expand traditional institutional goals and mission. These institutions were viable, but if they continued in the same direction along the same limited path, the prospects of an eventual trip to the "emergency room table" some day was inevitable. Rather than institutional resuscitation, the presidents of these institutions functioned as institutional "diagnosticians," providing symptomatic relief, and prescribing timely "prophylactic medication" to prevent any further loss of form and vitality. From these presidents' perspective, if concerns of institutional remediation were not addressed, institutional deterioration was inevitable. However, the sense of urgency was not as immediate as in the dying institutions. For these symptomatic institutions, the advantage of preventive treatment lay in the time it afforded their leaders to carefully weigh and consider options of institutional promise before decisions were made. The challenge of risk-taking leadership

for these presidents was to correctly diagnose institutional need, and to prescribe a healthy recovery plan responsive to growing and persistent symptoms.

Finally, there were colleges, such as Baker and Founders, which we designated as "healthy institutions." These colleges were in excellent condition and fundamentally sound, both academically and financially. They were operating at an efficient level of performance, but were considering investment in directions that would capitalize on current strengths. Much like a "fitness coach," presidents of these institutions functioned as institutional "body-builders," assessing institutional strengths, identifying the next level of challenge, and stimulating constituents to aspire to a new and higher level of performance, without jeopardizing existing foundations. That is not to say that these colleges did not experience temporary fluctuations in fitness from time to time. However, the integrity of the mission already in place in these institutions was not in question and institutional constituents knew what these institutions were about and had no intentions of challenging their basic directions. Nevertheless, the mandate for leadership was not as apparent in these colleges as it was in the dying or symptomatic institutions. After all, in the words of the president of Baker College, "one should not tinker with something which is working well." Nevertheless, presidents of these "healthy" colleges were compelled by a vision, albeit unclear, of new heights of institutional achievement.

Risks and Strategies of Presidential Leadership

Although the type and degree of leadership risks varied from one institution to another, these small college leaders were most anxious to talk about, and most readily interpreted the essential risk of their respective presidencies in terms of, the challenge of setting institutional direction and shaping institutional vision. They did so, often in the face of the "the unknown" or "the uncontrollable," by either preserving a vision, where one was rich in tradition and culture; by creating a vision, where one had long since been forgotten; by expanding or enhancing a vision, where one had grown complacent; or by reshaping and correcting a vision, where one was no longer adequate. Three key strategies seemed to

be important to these presidents as they talked about the challenges of institutional mission and vision within the context of risk-taking leadership in small colleges: (a) defining and charting institutional vision; (b) communicating the vision to institutional constituents; and (c) encouraging informed participation in and creating a sense of ownership of the vision. We came to appreciate this framework as a tool for understanding both the context and the nature of these presidents' beliefs and actions. We also came to understand that the challenges presented by these strategies, and the methods presidents chose to implement them, differed in significant ways from one type of institution to another (e.g., dying institutions versus healthy institutions), a point which we address further below.

Defining Institutional Vision

With respect to institutional vision, we found most often among dying institutions an absence or obsolescence of mission and direction. In the case of Davis College, for example, its one-time commitment to the preparation of technicians for the business community, as a proprietary college, had long since been forgotten by current campus constituents who essentially lacked any vision of what the college was about and what it was attempting to achieve. The immediate challenge of this president was to create a vision and sense of mission where there was none, a task which greatly benefited from Davis' state of institutional amnesia. As Davis' president observed, reflecting upon the composition of the institution's faculty and staff, "there is very little institutional memory [here]...we have very young people, people who have been here for a short time. There are probably no more than four people who are older than I am. So it's very young, it's relatively new."

Eastown College, also a dying institution, presented a different challenge. This was an institution whose environment and traditional constituency had disappeared over time in the evolution of urban growth. Once a denominationally-affiliated women's college, the campus was hardly a viable institution in the midst of a metropolitan center which no longer recognized or acknowledged its existence. The immediate challenge to this college came in

the form of a proposal to merge with two nearby institutions, foreclosing any hope of regaining institutional history or integrity. For the president of Eastown College, getting institutional constituents to envision the College as purposeful, unique, and viable was the first order of business. At Adams College, the institution's mission was dimmed over time in the shadows of a greatly expanded organizational structure, where a host of satellite campuses and centers dominated institutional policies and resources at the expense of institutional culture and tradition. The leadership task for this president involved the rediscovery and reclamation of lost institutional roots. Finally, at Gateview College, the debate over institutional vision was a function of inconsistencies between the perceptions of external constituents and supporters and the realities of institutional profile and practice. What was once an institution of white-glove propriety and manner was now a struggling college serving an increasingly diverse student population sharing little in common with a community and alumni base that had failed to understand or appreciate changes in its more recent history. This president focused his time and energy on correcting vision and bringing institutional mission in line with institutional reality. In each of these institutions, immediate action was required to preserve any hope for a viable future.

Presidents at symptomatic institutions were challenged by the task of reshaping institutional vision, primarily in response to a changing, or perhaps no longer viable, mission. In the case of Ignatius College, for example, dedicated exclusively to the goals of vocational discernment and preparation of candidates for the priesthood, the prospect of closing its doors had become all too real as the diminishing pool of applicants had reached critical proportions. In the words of the president, "we train people to make left-handed gloves but there are no more left-handed people. Should we just make left-handed gloves because that's what we do best and say we're going to stick to our guns and hope just out of interest they'll buy them?" The challenge for Ignatius College was to begin the process of asking fundamental questions about institutional purpose and mission in light of changing societal conditions. Hillside College, at the time the current president assumed

her office, had already made the decision to expand its mission beyond its original charter as a women's college. With an undergraduate student enrollment of almost 40 percent males, the institution had clearly changed in profile and practice, but not without strong resistance of some area constituents. The president's role in this case was to acknowledge the shift in institutional mission and to oversee its implementation, while shaping its constituents' view that such a change was both viable and desirable. Finally, at Carrolton College, a traditional women's college located in a large suburban area, a recommitment of mission was in order. By revisiting the institution's legacy, the challenge to Carrolton's president was to revitalize and crystalize a vision that had grown dim and unclear.

Healthy institutions, by definition, were those whose direction and sense of mission were already firmly established. Founders College, for example, had enjoyed a long history under the tutelage of its denominational sponsor, and was quite comfortable and successful in its commitments to a value-based, Christian education, and to programs of global responsibility. Baker College, too, had secured its position among a group of similar denominationally-based institutions whose programs were solid and institutional resources strong. Although both institutions thrived in their current states, they remained dynamic and responsive to changing needs. In doing so, they sought ways to continue a path of growth and development toward goals of institutional maturity and excellence. The challenge to these presidents was to articulate a vision for that growth that remained faithful to institutional legacy, built upon institutional tradition, and charted a viable future that elevated the college to a new level of performance.

In spite of varying degrees of institutional health, these presidents were one in their assessment of the importance of defining institutional vision as the principal leadership risk they assumed. Without such a vision, the risk to the institution was one of proceeding with limited resources and a narrow margin for error on a path of unknown direction and consequence. For these small colleges, this was a strategy they could ill-afford to pursue.

Communicating Institutional Vision

In addition to their primary task of defining institutional vision, we found that these college presidents also assumed major responsibility for articulating and communicating that vision to institutional constituents, internal as well as external to the college. This is done in both formal and informal ways, at times taking advantage of institutional rituals and practices (e.g., convocations and commencements, campus publications, programs, and reports), and at other times capitalizing on unexpected occasions as they arose, affording the opportunity to reinforce institutional legacy, proclaim institutional successes, and articulate institutional goals. In the case of Ignatius College, vision was focused and communicated in the form of a widely-circulated "white paper" ("A View toward the Future: Ignatius College, 1990-1997"), wherein various institutional scenarios were projected for purposes of raising the fundamental questions about institutional mission and direction. This paper served to raise the level of discussion and debate, engaging everyone, from students and faculty to members of the Board of Overseers and external constituents, in a more public review of questions that few had dared to consider previously.

From the perspective of the president of Carrolton College, communicating the vision is important because "the more people understand what you are doing, the more they are willing to cooperate with you and support that risk." Thus, she proceeded with a series of one-to-one conversations with individual faculty and staff members, asking where they thought the institution was, where it was going, and where they would like it to go. She also made it a point to appear regularly at a campus-wide coffee break where faculty and staff gathered informally to share ideas, experiences, and understandings. Such informal gatherings not only provided an opportunity for her to talk about images, goals, and symbols of success, but also to collect ideas, suggestions, recommendations, and feedback which may not have otherwise been communicated in a more formal setting.

At times, the most powerful technique for communicating vision may lie in the use of symbol and institutional culture. Such is the case at Davis College where the president instilled a new sense of institutional pride by replacing the institution's sign, renaming the campus newspaper, and developing a new institutional logo and motto ("without risk, there is no gain"). All of these strategies served to keep the vision in front of others, reminding them of what that vision was, articulating and communicating it at every available opportunity.

The function and importance of communicating institutional vision is further understood in the context of institutional health. For dying institutions, communicating the vision serves to rekindle hope, providing a welcomed relief to the pervasive sense of doom and decline that often characterizes an institution in such a state. It also serves to signal to external constituents and supporters that the institution is still alive and is actively seeking a viable direction. For symptomatic institutions, communicating the vision becomes an opportunity for all interested parties to examine current institutional strengths and limitations for purposes of identifying appropriate measures to place the institution on a healthier course. Knowing where the institution is going usually alleviates a variety of institutional symptoms and ailments. Finally, for healthy institutions, communicating the vision serves to reinforce institutional legacy and tradition, while at the same time, offering occasion for considering new levels of promise and performance.

Encouraging Involvement and Ownership of Vision

No matter how capable a college president may be, the challenges and complexities of shaping an institution's vision far exceed the capacity of any single individual to manage. Broad participation and genuine involvement by all constituents are essential for institutional success. All of these nine presidents seemed to agree that during the process of charting the institutional vision, creating a sense of involvement and ownership among constituents (including, alumni, board members, faculty, staff, and students) is critical for implementing the vision. Once constituents feel a sense of ownership in the vision, they

are in a better position to exercise their creativity and to be more productive. From these presidents' perspective, it is their job to create a working environment that releases the creative energy of the most important institutional asset - human resources.

We observed a wide range of strategies these presidents employed to encourage involvement in and ownership of the institution's vision. Some strategies were more formal in nature, such as the initiation of strategic steering committees, and others informal, such as campus "coffee breaks"; some were "top-down" initiatives, that began with a recommitment of the board's priorities, and others built upon "bottom-up" opportunities, such as a change in constituents served. Additionally, these presidents underscored the importance of engaging external as well as internal constituents. Broad constituent involvement in shaping the institution's mission benefited these colleges in a number of ways. First, the process itself, of engaging campus stakeholders, seemed to improve functioning at all levels of institutional health. In dying institutions, implementation of participatory structures, such as strategic planning groups or mission review committees for example, addressed the fundamental problem that contributed to the institution's ill health in the first place - lack of involvement or sense of investment in the institution's direction. In symptomatic institutions, participation in shaping the vision often alleviated a sense of concern among constituents about potential institutional problems, such as a shortfall in enrollments, that were becoming apparent to everyone. Finally, in healthy institutions, involvement served to strengthen and support continued institutional potential and creativity. For all nine institutions, involvement also served to spread the impact of institutional risk; the greater the involvement, the greater the willingness to incur a risk. In addition, involvement and ownership tended to dissipate the fear and, and perhaps even anger, associated with institutional change. Finally, without exception, such involvement ultimately yielded a sense of increased institutional hope, morale, and pride, and consequently, a renewed sense of community and identity.

The differential effects of these strategies and benefits, however, must be understood in the context of each institution's challenges. A case in point is Davis College, a dying institution, where the current president inherited an organizational infrastructure that was virtually nonexistent. He explained that, prior to his arrival,"...there was no faculty senate, there was no student government, there was no newspaper. . . . There was no governance system here." Consequently, almost all administrative decisions were made by his predecessor "without benefit of adequate data." Recalling the dynamics of this situation, he acknowledged: "Ten years ago the trustees were all friends of the president. They met once a year to confirm what he had done. There were nine members on the Board of Trustees and the president was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees." The remaining faculty and staff had understandably grown disinterested, and indeed felt powerless, to effect any change in the institution's purpose or direction. They knew little of what was going on, in terms of institutional policies or decisions, and essentially had disengaged themselves from its future. The first order of business for Davis' president was to involve faculty and staff in articulating an institutional vision; this he accomplished in the context of initiating a five-year plan. According to the president, the benefits were several:

> One of the first things we did was to recognize that we would need a plan. And we needed people to subscribe to this plan, to support it. So we developed our first five-year plan. But more important than the plan was the process that we went through. And we were very small then. I got them all to meet in one room. And we went through these steps. We talked about what [Davis College] was, and we were very frank about that. We then said, "What is it we want it to be?" and "How do we get it there?"

Motivating campus constituents to become involved, in this case, was a matter of helping them ask the right question, as the president explained:

> This institution grew out of a proprietary school background. It chose to compare itself to those colleges--the proprietary schools. And it compared well. What we started to do in 1981 was to compare ourselves to a different set of schools, those you and I recognize as colleges. When we made that shift, the institution lacked a whole bunch of things. But there was a clear direction in what it was we should develop, where we should go, what things we lacked.

For Davis College, this participatory process led to a vision of growth and goals that were made both public and explicit: "We recognized the only way we were going to do some of the things that needed to be done, and collectively we wanted to do, was to grow. So we worked at growth. Growth was important to us." Included among those goals was the public declaration that Davis would become a four-year liberal arts institution and would develop graduate programs by 1990. Much to the credit of the president's special efforts to infuse a new sense of institutional pride, confidence and enthusiasm, faculty and staff soon realized that they made a difference in the life of the institution, that they were valued, and that their opinions counted. The pay-off for Davis was an empowered constituency that took pride in and celebrated the regular accomplishment of pre-set goals, a new institutional tradition, as recalled by the president:

> We celebrate success. When we crossed 500 students, when we crossed that level, we had a party up here. We had champagne. We had snacks and a whole bunch of stuff. When we crossed 700 students, we did the same thing. And this fall, when we cross the 900 students, we'll do exactly the same thing. I also have made a point of telling others about our successes and things we have done.

Perhaps the best testament to the power of that participation in institutional visioning was reflected recently in a very successful capital campaign to which 100 percent of the faculty contributed. This "bottom-up" commitment to processes of participation and planning, encouraged by Davis' president, energized campus constituents and empowered them to accomplish goals never before considered.

Another case in point is Carrolton College, a symptomatic institution, where increasing involvement and ownership meant starting at the top. This institution was undergoing a period of significant transitions when the president returned after completing her doctorate. Key challenges facing the College at that time appeared to be the revitalization of the institution's governing body, the reconfirmation of the College's mission of providing services to women's education and leadership development, and the redefinition of the meaning of the College's Catholic identity. Especially problematic was the tarnished image many women's colleges have suffered in recent history. Recognizing

this in her 1989 inaugural address, the president said: "It became fashionable to speak of women's colleges as fossils of an outdated era or, at best, finishing schools for the elite, training houses for religious life or the breeding grounds of dependent and submissive women." Such a tarnished image, combined with diminished federal support, resulted in a drastic reduction of women's colleges in the country. Reflecting further on this trend, she noted: "Some three hundred women's institutions existing in 1960 have been reduced to less than 100 in 1989, of which nearly one half of those remaining are women's Catholic colleges." Facing all these unfavorable conditions, creating a clear sense of the College's own Catholic identity and reconfirming its commitment to women's education became more critical than ever. Undoubtedly, the governing Board had a major role to play in this endeavor because it determined which direction the College went, what the College identity meant, and what the College stood for. Without a highly committed and actively involved Board of Trustees standing at the forefront of change, the College's chance to ride against the tide would be limited.

As Carrolton's president noted, most Catholic institutions reorganized their Trustees back in the 1960's, moving the institutions forward by leaps and bounds. This College did not even consider restructuring its Board until the late 1980's. While wonderful things were happening to other Catholic colleges, Carrolton College grew stagnant, laboring under a resistance to change coming from the religious community which sponsored the College. The president clearly pointed out the heart of this issue facing the institution:

> The religious community put a box around this institution. They sent safe people here for a long period of time, people that were not going to rock the boat. Therefore the institution didn't grow. They didn't send people here and tell them: move this institution. They wanted it to remain what it was because the community's thinking was . . . if we stand still long enough the world is going to come back where we are because we are right.

Naturally, one of the first priorities for the president was to revitalize the College's governance structure. Over the years this College had been served by both a Board of Trustees and a Board of Advisors. The former was comprised exclusively of members of

the sponsoring religious community, and the latter by leaders and members of the local civic community. The chair of the Board of Trustees was also, by charter, the provincial of the religious community; serving as chair was only a tangential responsibility. Consequently, little action was taken and issues were avoided, in the hope that the world would eventually come around to where it used to be. The Advisory Board, on the other hand, offered many good ideas, but assumed no responsibility for their implementation, as the president acknowledged:

> The problem was that there was no responsibility for the advice they gave. The Advisory Board was lay men and women from the civic community; we had about 45. They are very high powered people, but all they had to do was to give advice and then they walked away.

After months of hard debate, the old Board of Trustees voted itself out and the old Board of Advisors was also abolished. Quite a number of the former advisors to the College was elected to the new Board of Trustees, now composed of 40 members, both lay and religious. This restructuring of the Board represented a major change in the life of the College, a change from a more conservative to a more open-minded governing body, from a wait-and-see mentality to a pro-action mentality, and from an increasingly stagnant to a vital and dynamic institution.

With the newly structured Board, each member was held accountable for the advice he or she gave. "They have to state where they are on issues. They cannot hide as they did before. They have to come out in front of their peers," commented the president. Procedurally, explained the president, "I am directly responsible to the Board. I'm not directly responsible to the community in a sense of operating this college as I was before." So people can no longer go to the provincial to do end runs around the president. However, the essence of an accountable Board is, as the president stated, "to have a Board of Trustees that has the expertise on it, as well as the responsibility for the decisions they want to make. In other words, you don't just give advice but you have to stand behind that advice." Without the full support of an accountable Board, a president functions with his

or her hands tied. Realizing its importance, Carrolton's president adopted a personal approach to getting the Trustees more enthusiastic and more accountable -- developing personal rapport with and building basic support from the Trustees. "The first thing is that they have to get to know me as a person, besides being president. That's a strategy in my mind," said the president. When the Chair of the new Board was elected, she said to him,

> I would like just to sit down and have a conversation for you to ask me questions. What am I interested in? I want to tell you about me because I want to establish a rapport with you that transcends a working relationship.

"I'm on a different level of relationship there. And I think it's very important," she further explained. This approach not only reflects her leadership style but also a characteristic functionability of small colleges.

Ownership of Carrolton's vision was also enhanced from the "bottom-up." When the president learned of her appointment as the senior executive officer at the College, one of her first responses was to conduct a systematic inquiry of the college community. "My purpose was to obtain an appraisal of the strengths, needs, values, and weaknesses of [Carrolton] in this moment of transition," said the president. She interviewed members of the Board, faculty and staff, and even the maintenance and cleaning personnel. She invited them in and asked what they thought about the current status of the College, where the College was going, what they liked or did not like, what they hoped to see strengthened, and what they wanted from the new president. Those interviews produced over 40 pages of information which the president used as a basis to work on the institutional vision.

> From the gathered data, as well as from my own observations and experiences at this college, I mapped a direction for [Carrolton] as she stands poised on the threshold of the Nineties. That direction is premised on our identity as a Catholic liberal arts college for women. (Inaugural Address, 1989)

This sort of "grass-roots" listening also served to engage campus constituents as stakeholders in the institution's direction. In being asked to express their concerns and ideas about the College's mission, they were assuming some responsibility for its shape. "I think the person in charge has to hear what people are saying directly -- not filtered

through a vice president," commented the president. Direct listening not only enabled her to gain a tremendous number of ideas from people, but it also helped her to have a good sense of where the institution was in people's minds, bringing them together in creating and implementing the institutional vision.

The case of Founders College illustrates another challenge to involvement and leadership, but in the context of a healthy institution. Unlike a dying or symptomatic institution, Founders College rests on nearly a 100 year tradition of Christian liberal arts education. The vision underlying this heritage remains alive and well in its contemporary form and, by and large, the president enjoys strong support from all constituents for the college's mission and programs. The leadership challenge in this type of institution is the problem of maintaining stakeholder interest and motivation when everything is working well already. Additionally, the risk of leadership involved in such an institution, which is supported by a strong institutional culture and tradition, is the potential for veering away from its foundational strengths. In the words of Founders' president, the task is twofold: "...my role, in a sense [is] to support the new without alienating the old."

Although resolute in its commitment to a clear educational mission, Founders College, like many other institutions dependent upon traditional age constituents, began to encounter enrollment shortfalls recently in some areas, in response to the demographic shifts in the larger society. The vision and institutional commitments of Founders was not in question; however, the usual wait-and-see admissions strategies, that had served the College well for so long, were no longer adequate in light of increased inter-institutional competition. Founders had never thought of itself in terms of a vision that needed to be marketed; the challenge became one of how should Founders go about the business of telling its story to potential students so they, in turn, would want to participate in that vision. How does an institution like Founders get its faculty and staff involved in the communication and implementation of this vision?

Within this context, the president of Founders supported the initiation by faculty of an interdepartmental grant competition program, to stimulate creative ideas about recruiting new students to various programs and departments. One of the early conclusions they arrived at, following the completion of a review of its practices, was that Founders College, in order to continue its legacy, must find a way of marketing not just the College in general but also specific departments. Reflecting upon this challenge, the president defined the nature of the problem:

> ...more and more families and young people are saying, "what is the strength of the department that I'm interested in majoring in?" They're looking at the catalog. "How many faculty do you have in communications? What kind of equipment do you have in your television production course? Do you have a campus radio station?".... So they are very interested in the quality questions of the department not just is the college as a whole accredited, or do you have a fine little college there at the south end of town? They want to know more and more about the particular department they are interested.

Commenting on the grant the college received to support this effort, the president noted:

> We decided this was a very fine [idea]. This idea came from faculty leadership...one of the faculty members decided we'd take part of the grant and we'd make mini grants, maybe say, $2,500, and have departments compete for promotional money that would be under their control if they came up with the best ideas as to how to attract more students, and to tell the story of the excellence of their departments.

Questions were raised immediately about the compatibility of this competitive approach with the ethos of the institution. From the faculty's perspective, a competitive "business" model violated the nature of the religious community they work very hard to sustain on the campus. However, as the president concluded, the net effect of this strategy, rather than diminishing the College's mission, was to engage faculty as active participants in articulating the vision of the institution, a role they had never before assumed in such a direct manner:

> We didn't want the competition to turn ugly or to, in any sense, promote a spirit of some department putting down another department. And I don't think that happened. But in response to... Again, we don't live just for ourselves. I mean the purpose of this place is not just to have a comfortable place for faculty to work. We've got to attract parents and young people to choose this place. And when we began to work at that we had a very nice gain in enrollment, and it has continued.

For this healthy and "comfortable" institution, the challenge of getting constituents involved was met by creating incentives to stimulate thinking about the institution's functioning. In spreading the responsibility for communicating institutional vision, more individuals were engaged in questions of the college's fitness and health, resulting in the establishment of new goals of performance. Reflecting on this approach, Founder's president concluded: "So you have to tell your story. You have to market the institution. That was a risk we took I would say turned out well."

Preliminary Conclusions

In small colleges, in particular, it appears that institutional vitality depends much upon having a clear vision of where the institution is going, having that vision understood by institutional constituents, and having that vision subscribed to through involvement and ownership of various stakeholders. Perhaps therein lie the essential tasks of risk-taking leadership in these types of institutions: articulating the vision; communicating the vision; and soliciting ownership of the vision.

Four features seem to characterize an institutional vision-building process if it is to succeed. First, a vision must build upon an institution's historical identity of "who they are," drawing upon an historical continuum that, at the same time, reflects contemporary contexts and needs. A vision divorced from institutional tradition and legacy will neither serve the institution well nor sustain itself in the long run. Second, a vision must have solid support from internal and external constituents. Without the support of believers, a vision stands empty. Third, a vision must be strategic, but also flexible. By "strategic," we mean that the vision must provide an institutional direction and serve as a guide to measure the long-term fitness of any opportunity. Being flexible means that the vision must be compelling, but not blinding. It must be continually articulated to maintain responsiveness to new needs as they arise. Fourth, a vision must have a clear target, that is, it must contain reachable goals within specified time frames.

The success of the vision-building process also seems to be a function of institutional health. For instance, the leadership agenda of a dying institution is to address the immediate question of survival; for a symptomatic institution, it is to diagnose accurately and to intervene with a timely strategy; and for a healthy institution, it is to identify and embrace a new level of performance.

Timing, in terms of the life cycle of the institution, its readiness for change, and the leverage an institution's senior officer can exert, is also an important consideration for understanding the risks of leadership. As we listened to each president reflect upon the history of his or her institution, it was clear that whatever their current state, all of these colleges experienced peak moments, as well as times of considerable stress and doubt in questions about institutional direction and mission. In other words, the various states of institutional health we have described here may, in fact, be points in the usual cycle or ebb and flow of organizational life. Healthy institutions over time, if participation and ownership in the mission is not nurtured and challenged, may begin to exhibit symptoms which may, in turn, jeopardize institutional vitality if not addressed effectively. Without a commitment to new leadership and vision, symptomatic institutions risk becoming dying institutions, and dying institutions risk their very existence unless immediate and significant action is taken to restore their vital signs. So the first, and perhaps most important, challenge of risk-taking leadership for the presidents of small colleges is to accurately assess the state of institutional health and to determine the nature of the basic leadership task required - resuscitation, diagnosis and symptomatic relief, or enhancement of conditioning and performance.

Another point of consideration with respect to timing is the institution's readiness for change. The president of Ignatius College, borrowing from familiar concepts of organizational change, emphasized the importance of understanding the dynamics and phases of change in the course of an institution's life. Accordingly, a period of change is often preceded by a period of stability, understood metaphorically as "frozen." The first

task is to unfreeze the organization, then to implement change. This, in turn, is followed by a refreezing period where a new direction is set and stabilized. Effectiveness in risk-taking leadership, then, requires an understanding of what phase of institutional change the organization is in. Reflecting upon his experience at Ignatius College, the president advised:

> Before you can do change you've got to allow plenty of time for that to unfreeze, which is what I considered being able to discuss it, let people feel free to, kind of, say that they don't like it, they are afraid without being threatened immediately that it's all going to happen tomorrow.

It took this president almost three years to create an environment where people could legitimately talk about mission, change and experiment with some new things. Some leaders make the mistake of trying to change an institution before having a clear sense of just how frozen the institution is in its present state.

Timing may also be critical in terms of the degree of leverage an institutional leader can exert on the process of change. Discussing his early experiences in charting a new direction for Adams College, a "dying institution," the president underscores the importance of acting early and quickly in addressing issues of institutional mission:

> ...timing is absolutely critical. When it comes to mission, you only have a year to set the direction. You can't wait a long time. It's very different with some other issues. Other issues, you have time. But when it comes to the big stuff, either you've got to do it relatively quickly, which is very difficult because you don't have a lot of knowledge and so that the most difficult thing for a chief executive is to get enough information and trust your instincts to take the risk in a direction.... Whatever it is, you've only got six months to a year because everybody is watching you. Everybody is trying to figure out what is this person committed to, what is he going to do. Once you spend a year, two years studying, thinking before you set the direction, everybody would say, okay, they are reading you or looking at you, trying to figure out where you stand. If two years later you come out with a major change, they say, 'What are you talking about? This is the way you've been behaving for two years.' So the change becomes very disruptive. So that if you are going to make big changes, which is what mission all about, you've got to make them early. They've got to be very broad and abstract. They can't be narrow and focused. And they have to be clear, so people can buy in. And people will buy in early. They will give a president a lot of room, six months, eight months, nine months. But not much after that on mission.

For this particular president, a fundamental difference with the Adams College Board of Trustees was resolved by "putting his job on the line," a strategy that carries the most leverage early, rather than later, in a presidential tenure.

Finally, we conclude that the success of risk taking leadership also may be a function of fit between presidential style and an institution's needs, within the context of institutional health. For instance, we observed a distinct and consistent enterprising spirit among the presidents of dying institutions. Furthermore, the more intuitive style with which they seemed to approach problem solving, although high in risk, apparently provided the kind of organizational jolt necessary to get these institutions going. In some cases, the enthusiasm and sense of hope ingrained by these presidents almost singlehandedly breathed new life into an institutional framework that had all but expired. Whether this same sort of style would be appropriate and effective at an institution with a different level of health bears further investigation.

In summary, we invoke the wisdom of two Chinese philosophers, Zhuang Zi of the Zhou Dynasty (771 - 221 B.C.) and Han Yu, a literary giant in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Both offer an appropriate metaphor for illuminating the essential role of these risk-taking leaders of small colleges. In the words of Zhuang Zi, 井底之蛙 (jing di zhi wa - "a frog at the bottom of a well cannot understand the ocean because it is confined to such a limited area"). Referring also to this same image, Han Yu advised 坐井观天 (zuo jing guan tian - "only those who watch the sky from the bottom of a well claim the sky is small"). Our conclusion, from observing these presidents embrace the risk of leadership of these small institutions, is that they serve principally to articulate, communicate, and elicit ownership of a vision they proclaim from the top of the well.

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